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HOUSE OF COMMONS,

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MR. BUXTON'S MOTION

FOR A

RESOLUTION DECLARATORY OF SLAVERY

IN THE

British Colonies

BEING CONTRARY TO THE ENGLISH CONSTITUTION

AND TO

CHRISTIANITY.

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1823.

THE

SPEECH

OF

ALEXANDER BARING, Esq.

IN THE

HOUSE OF COMMONS,

On Mr. Buxton's Motion for a resolution declaratory of Slavery in the British Colonies being contrary to the English Constitution and to Christianity.

Having been alluded to by the Honourable Mover, Mr. Baring rose to deliver his sentiments on the very important subject before the House, which must be touched with the utmost delicacy, though he thought it necessary that something should be done. If there were

facts of that extreme atrocity, which had been set forth, every risk must be encountered to get the better of the system which had produced them; and no time should be lost in setting about the work. But he considered the statements of the condition of the negroes, and the hardships to which they were exposed, made by the supporters of the Motion, as very much exaggerated; and the House should be cautious how it reposed its confidence on those whose thoughts, for many years past, had been continually brooding on this subject, but who knew nothing of the matter from experience, and had probably received a bias of mind incompatible with a sound and prudent decision. He preferred to confide in the testimony of the Governors of the Colonies, which had been read by the Member for Sandwich. [Mr. Marryatt.] He trusted to the accounts of gentlemen of education and merit, who had no interest in the Colonies; and who had been directed by the Government, of which they were the servants, to

give them a faithful account of the slave population. It was very improbable, that those high officers should mislead the Government. It was much more likely, that the supporters of the Motion should themselves be deceived, as to the general condition of the slaves in the West Indies, by those in whose narratives they had confided, and who may have drawn the pictures they have presented, as portraits of the whole, from individual likenesses, or solitary instances of oppression, after having exaggerated them; and thus have converted the distorted exceptions into the rule. He had no property in the West Indies, but he had been himself through the southern states of America, and had therefore witnessed the situation of negro slavery. From his personal observation in that country, and all the information he had been able to collect from the West Indies, if he were considering the condition of the different classes of mankind, and the degrees in which they were deserving of the consideration of the Philanthropist and of

the Christian, the fate of the West Indian slave is far from being that which would first arrest his attention, or which he should consider as burthened with the greatest portion of those hardships, which are more or less the lot of all conditions of life. The name of slave is a harsh one; but their real condition is undoubtedly, in many respects, superior to that of most of the peasantry of Europe. They were well clothed and well fed, and, he believed, generally treated with justice and kindness. Their moral state is, probably, that which most loudly calls out for consideration and amendment. He hoped that, in this respect, considerable improvement would take place; nor could he see what danger or injury could arise to the planters from a well-digested and prudently-executed plan of religious instruction, by which alone the negro could be raised in the scale of human beings. Should, however, Parliament decide, that any more material alteration should be effected in the condition of the

blacks, the masters are undeniably entitled to compensation for any losses which such a new course of policy might bring upon them. We should otherwise be committing the grossest injustice, under professions of justice and humanity. *He warned the country, that if the Negroes in the West Indies were liberated, either immediately or remotely, or in any way whatever, those colonies would be of no farther value to Great Britain.* It would not be worth our while to keep up governments and garrisons among them. It was ridiculous to suppose that a free black population in those islands, sufficiently enlightened to know the value of their rights, and to be able to appreciate their strength, would long continue to serve the interests of proprietors residing in England, or that England would long preserve any interest whatever in those colonies. He thought the plan of the Honourable Mover of the Resolution for emancipating the children, born after a certain day, would be attended with very great difficulty, as well as much injustice. It

would convert a real property into an interest for life, and what planter would calculate his own interest so badly, as to rear up, at considerable cost, those children, who would be taken from him as soon as their labour would be valuable? Besides, at the time the slave trade was abolished, the promoters of that measure relied, with great reason, upon its good effects being felt, in obliging the planters to take care of the children of their slaves, and of the mothers during and after their pregnancy. Deprived of the means of purchasing other slaves, it was said, that it would be highly their interest to do so; but now, according to the notions of the supporters of the Resolution, this principle was to be abandoned, and another, directly the reverse, substituted for it, which would make it the interest of the planters to neglect the children, in whom they would cease to have any interest. Such inconsistency was a proof that the abolitionists had not calculated their plans correctly, and therefore gave the House no encouragement to follow them

with any confidence. He could not agree with those who thought there was no danger of the slaves mistaking the nature of such discussions in Parliament. It had been said by an Honourable and Learned Gentleman (Mr. Brougham) that the insurrection of the slaves in Barbados, which had occurred a few years ago, was not owing to their having mistaken the object of the registry, a measure at that time about to be established. He called upon that Honourable and Learned Gentleman for the authority on which he made that assertion [*no answer*]. He (Mr. Baring), on the authority of the governor of the island, Sir James Leith, maintained, that it was in consequence of the intervention of Parliament at that time being mistaken by the slaves; and from that instance of mischief having ensued, he argued, that further evil may be expected from the repetition of the same causes. Indeed it was impossible but that the arguments in their favour should cause great excitement in the minds of the slaves. If Parliament were to deliberate

whether the property of the rich in this country should not be divided among the poor—if the poor were told that it was hard for them to live upon bread and water, while the rich feasted upon venison and champaign, (and, on the principles of Christianity, good arguments on such a topic could not be wanting,) it would be exhibiting an entire ignorance of human nature to suppose that such discussions could be entertained without imminent danger, even in the presence of a population more enlightened and more accustomed to the occasional extravagances of free discussion than the negroes of the West Indies. The Honourable Mover of the Resolution had given cases of negro slavery which had been put an end to without any convulsion or ill consequences having followed. Those who spoke of these instances could hardly express themselves in terms of sufficient delight. They were full of the beauty of the scene, in observing how gradually the whole mass of slavery melted and sunk away, without disorder of any kind, or any measures

on the part of the Legislature being needed, to prevent the danger and mischief usually anticipated. But he begged leave to say, that the instances mentioned are cases so little in point, that it would require much candour to suppose they could be selected, with good faith, by those who brought them forward. In New York, the white population was about a million. Its slaves, at the time of their liberation, did not exceed five thousand. It was impossible that the whites could fear any thing from the emancipation of the few slaves that were among them. It was the same in New Jersey, another instance which had been adduced. There the white population was very numerous, and the number of the slaves did not exceed ten thousand. In Pennsylvania the whites were nearly as numerous as in New York, but the slave population, owing to the exertions of the Quakers, has at all times been inconsiderable. The case of Columbia was, perhaps, a little more in point. Yet according to the statement of the Honourable Mover,

the free population was more than double that of the slaves, and the fate of that country can hardly be considered as yet sufficiently settled, to draw any sober conclusions from what is passing there. In Ceylon, another of his examples, the slaves were in a state of vassalage, more like the condition of the ancient peasantry of England, and all classes consisted of men who derived their origin from the same source, viz. the Malabar race. That country was under a strong military government. Its tranquillity did not rest on the opinion of the freeman or the slave, and, therefore, neither in this nor in the other instances brought forward, is there that resemblance with the situation of our West India colonies, where the slaves out-number the whites, in the proportion of at least 10 to 1, to constitute any thing like a perfect analogy. We are not, therefore, justified in believing, that slavery in our West India colonies would melt into freedom, without convulsion, or that the agitation of questions of this nature is unattended with

imminent peril. We ought always to remember, that the West India Planters are our brethren, the descendants of the same ancestors, equally with ourselves entitled to the protection of the laws, and to the parental affection and care of the state. With every respect for the motives of the numerous Petitioners on this subject, he must confess, that he had witnessed too much the tricks and calumnies by which these representations were collected, to ascribe much weight to them; and he conjured the Right Honourable Gentleman, as a Minister of the Crown, not to be led away by petitions so got up. They were signed by persons, few of whom had any means of information, and mostly by those who were in the habit of annually quieting an over-timid conscience by a subscription to missions and to some petition about slavery, of the nature of which they knew nothing, but from the distorted exaggerations of enthusiasts. When it was considered that these petitions were, as is well known, brought in such loads

to the table of the House, in consequence of a plan organized by a few persons in the metropolis, Gentlemen would ascribe to them only the weight they deserved. The operation of this species of organized delusion has been tried on several subjects in this House. It is now to be tried for the destruction of the West Indian Proprietors. However absurd the principles sought to be promoted may be, it is well known how difficult it is to resist, when in this country popular opinion is once raised. The Court, the Ministry must give way to the fashionable humbug of the day, and even the conclaves of Sovereigns, united at Vienna or Verona, must promulgate something about negro slavery. The Plenipotentiaries of England regularly suffer themselves to be sneered at for their hypocrisy in these great meetings, but they never fail to return home with a bundle of papers to lay before the House, to prove the great interest which the Emperors of Austria and Russia take in the fate of Africa. In this instance, state papers, full of humanity and

Christian feelings, are cheaply bestowed; but if these great Sovereigns were very serious, one would suppose they could hardly want matter in their own countries, where slavery prevails in full force, to try the experiments they so authoritatively recommend. He could not but feel surprise, that the Honourable Mover of the Resolution had made so light of vested interests, charters of our Sovereigns, and Acts of the Parliament of the country, in this case, when, on a former occasion, he appeared to be so stout a champion for the sacred observance of these titles to property. He recollected, when it was proposed by his Majesty's Government to give the people of this country a cheap and wholesome beer, which they might use at home, without the necessity of going to the ale-house, a measure which he (Mr. Baring) considered to be one of wisdom and humanity, because nothing could tend more to increase the comforts of the families of the poor, that Honourable Gentleman opposed it with all his might, and was as loud in plead-

ing for the maintenance of vested rights in one class of the community against all others, as any Member of the House. There was, perhaps, no alteration in our laws, which would more especially contribute to the well being of the labouring classes of this country, than emancipating them from that monopoly which put them at the mercy of a powerful combination, both for the price and quality of their principal beverage. The Honourable Gentleman was, in this instance, a most resolute stickler for vested interests, and even for rights, which few considered to be so evident as himself. He (Mr. Baring) was surprised, therefore, to observe the Honourable Member for Weymouth had said so little of the just claims of the Planters for the losses they might sustain from the experiments he recommends. [Mr. Buxton said he admitted their right to compensation.] If any man's property in this country be taken away from him for a general purpose, the laws awarded him compensation for it, and he must always enter his protest

against all violations of this wholesome and just rule: whether the West Indians are to be despoiled, or ourselves; or whether the object, of which the owner is to be bereft, be slaves, or other property. He concluded, by wishing well to the endeavours of his Majesty's Ministers, in the execution of the delicate and difficult task which they had undertaken, trusting, as he did, that, looking at this question with a sincere desire of amelioration and practical improvement, they would also do so with the wisdom and caution of statesmen, who knew how to appreciate the great interests with which they had to treat.

THE END.

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